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Final 1990 Trends Show Mixed Results for Religious Practice in America

As Americans entered the 1990s and faced the twin challenges of recession and impending war in Iraq, they also turned more frequently to religion, but this upturn in interest did not always result in increased formal participation in the church. (Preliminary results for early 1991 which we will soon report show increases in the earlier part of this year both in interest in religion and in church attendance.)

Measurements of the importance of religion have been inching up in recent years. In 1990, 56% of the adults interviewed throughout the year said that religion is "very important" in their lives. This continues a trend since 1987 in which the proportion of people giving this answer has increased by a single percentage point annually, so that the number has gradually risen from 53% in 1987 to the current figure of 56%. The current level matches the high marks of the early 1980s, but still is well short of the peaks attained in the 1950s and 1960s when at least seven Americans in 10 considered religion important in their lives.

In addition to the 56%, in 1990 who say religion is very important in their lives, there are 30% of Americans who consider it somewhat important. But 13%, feel is not very important and 1% are unable to make up their minds about its importance to them.

The profile of those considering religion very important remains unchanged from that noted in the past. Religion is of comparatively greater importance to people over 50 years of age (69%) and women (63%) than to young people (46%) or to men (48%). Blacks (77%) are far more likely to consider it very important than are other non-whites (54%) or whites (53%).

Protestants more often than Catholics state that religion is very important in their lives by a margin of 63% to 51%. Jews are more inclined to regard religion as somewhat important (50%) than as very important (20%) to them.

Attendance Trends

1990	40%
1989	43
1988	42
1987	40
1985	42
1983	40
1982	41
1981	41
1970s	40
1960s	44
1950s	46
1940s	37
1930s	41

Membership Trends

1990	65%
1989	68
1988	65
1987	69
1985	71
1983	69
1982	67
1970s	70
1960s	72
1950s	73
1940s	76
1930s	73

The illuminated capital letters in this month's issue are an arabesque style used in America in the nineteenth century.

Importance of Religion - 1990

How important would you say religion is in your own life: very important, somewhat important, or not very important?

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not Very important
Total	56%	30%	13%
Gender			
Male	48	32	18
Female	63	28	9
Age			
18-29	41	43	15
30-49	51	32	16
50 and older	69	19	10
Race			
Whte	53	32	14
Black	77	17	4
Other	54	25	15
Education			
College Graduate	48	30	20
Attended College	53	32	14
High School Graduate	55	33	11
Non-H.S. graduate	67	22	10
Annual Household Income			
$50,000 and over	47	30	21
$30,000-$49,999	50	35	14
$20,000-$29,999	57	30	12
Under $20,000	61	28	10
Region			
East	51	33	15
Midwest	54	35	10
South	66	24	8
West	47	28	23
Religious Preference			
Protestant	63	28	9
Catholic	51	38	11
Jewish	20	50	30
None	27	24	44

"No opinion" (1%, nationally) omitted.

Membership in a church or synagogue has been going up and down in recent years, and 1990 was no exception to this trend. Throughout 1990, about two Americans in three (65%) reported they were members. Recognize that these were self-reports and local church officials might on occasion be surprised by those who either claimed they were or were not members! By the same token, at the national level some denominations use methods such as considering someone to be a member from birth or baptism that tend to inflate membership claims.

The long-term trend since these measurements were begun by Gallup in the 1930s has been downward. From the 1930s through the 1970s membership was claimed by at least seven adults in 10. During the 1980s membership dropped in an average year to 68%. The lowest figure recorded during the 1980s decade was 65% in 1988, or the same as now reported for 1990.

The comparatively low membership figures in the West (54%) probably have contributed most to the decline in the national average. Residents in the East are at the national average (65%), but those of the Midwest and South, which of course include the "Bible Belt" states, continue membership at the 70-percent level of prior decades.

Women (7%) are more likely to claim membership than men (61%). Membership rolls also swell as the potential pool gets larger with just over half of adults under 30 (57%) holding membership, compared to 74% of those who are 50 and older. This pattern takes on particular relevance as the baby boom generation matures and brings new members to the fold.

Catholics (74%) are slightly more likely than Protestants (71%) to say they are church members. Two in three Jews (65%) say they hold membership in a synagogue.

Membership - 1990

Do you happen to be a member of a church or a synagogue?

National	65%
Gender	
Male	61
Female	70
Age	
18-29	57
30-49	63
50 and older	74
Race	
White	66
Black	70
Other	51
Education	
College Graduate	69
Attended College	67
High School Graduate	64
Not-H.S. Graduate	64
Annual Household Income	
$50,000 and over	64
$30,000-$49,999	65
$20,000-$29,999	68
Under $20,000	64
Region	
East	65
Midwest	70
South	70
West	54
Religious Preference	
Protestant	71
Catholic	74
Jewish	65
None	14

Counting the number of people in the pews may not be a very accurate barometer of religious need and interest, because going to church or synagogue has been a remarkably steady measurement over the decades. The proportion attending over the years usually has not varied by more than three percentage points. Over the decades one could generally count upon finding about four people in 10 attending services in a typical week. 1990 was no different in this respect, with 40% of the adults interviewed throughout the year saying they attended church or synagogue at least once during the week preceding the time of interview.

Catholics were the most frequent attenders, with 48% saying they had gone to church, compared to 42% of Protestants who gave similar reports. Less than one Jew in four (23%) reported attending services in the previous week throughout 1990.

The West lagged far behind the rest of the nation, with only 30% its people reporting worship service attendance in a typical week. The South reported the highest proportion (44%), but was only slightly ahead of the Midwest (42%) and East (40%) in this respect.

Attendance and membership probably are a "chicken or the egg" question, with above-average attenders mirroring the findings for membership according to demographic characteristics. Women, for example, were more likely than men to attend, by a margin of 44% to 36%. People over 50 (50%) were almost twice as likely as those under age 30 (29%) to be found in church on the weekend. Blacks (49%) more often reported attendance than was true for whites (39%).

Attendance - 1990

Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days?

National	40%
Gender	
Male	36
Female	44
Age	
18-29	29
30-49	38
50 and older	50
Race	
White	39
Black	49
Other	32
Education	
College Graduate	46
Attended College	44
High School Graduate	37
Not-H.S. Graduate	37
Annual Household Income	
$50,000 and over	39
$30,000-$49,999	40
$20,000-$29,999	41
Under $20,000	38
Region	
East	40
Midwest	42
South	44
West	30
Religious Preference	
Protestant	42
Catholic	48
Jewish	23
None	11

Attendance of Easter services definitely is strongly a matter of faith, with 86% of those saying that religion is very important in their lives likely to have attended this year. Less likely to have attended are those who consider religion only fairly important (61%), and showing up at Easter was probably just a pro forma appearance for some who say religion is not very important in their lives (18%).

Women (72%) were more likely than men (63%) to have attended Easter services, and if attendees looked younger than usual this year it was because 71% of adults under age 30 planned to attend. As this is the age group least likely to understand the significance of Easter (64%), hopefully, many learned the meaning of the resurrrection for the first time this year.

The results are based on telephone interviews with a randomly-selected national sample of 1,010 adults, 18 and older, conducted between March 1991. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Trend - Those Considering Religion "Very Important"

1990	56%
1989	55
1988	54
1987	53
1986	55
1985	55
1984	56
1983	56
1982	56
1981	56
1980	55
1978	52
1965	70
1952	75

Who Attended Easter Services?

Do you plan on attending church services this coming Easter Sunday, or not?

	Plan on going	Not going	Not sure
Total	68%	30%	2%
Gender			
Male	63	34	3
Female	72	26	2
Education			
College Graduate	67	32	1
Some College	71	28	1
High School Graduate	69	28	3
Not High School Graduate	64	32	4
Age			
18-29	71	28	1
30-49	66	32	2
50 and older	67	29	4
Region			
East	69	30	1
Midwest	71	27	2
South	71	24	5
West	59	40	1
Religion			
Protestant	72	25	3
Catholic	85	14	1
Religion in life...			
Very Important	86	12	2
Fairly Important	61	35	4
Not Very Important	18	81	1
Church Member	84	14	2
Not a Member	36	61	3
Attended in Last 7 Days	95	4	1
Did Not Attend	48	48	4

Did They Know Why They Were Celebrating Easter?

On a typical Sunday in recent years about 43% of the faithful could be found at worship services on weekends , but this Easter Sunday attendance rose to two persons in three (68%). Not all of those attending, however, may have fully comprehended just what it was they were commemorating on Easter. Three adults in four (75%) when asked were able to explain that Easter celebrates the resurrection or rebirth of Jesus Christ, but among the remaining respondents tested, 11% gave an erroneous reason and 14% admitted they just didn't know what its religious significance may be.

Christians showed somewhat higher-than-average knowledge of this central event in their faith , but even among their ranks were some who could not explain why Easter is celebrated. Protestants and Catholics are statistically the same in this respect, with 80% of Catholics able to give a right answer, compared to 79% of the Protestants. Only slightly better than half of non-Christians (54%) were able to state why Easter is celebrated.

Awareness of the significance of Easter may be a matter of both knowledge and faith. Correct answers about the meaning of Easter are more likely to be given by those who attended college (87%) than by those who did not (68%). Awareness also is greater among people who consider religion to be very important (80%) or fairly important (76%) in their lives than among those who say it is not very important (61%).

Continued on page 4...

Knowledge of the Meaning of Easter

Would you happen to know why Christians celebrate Easter?

	Correct answer	Incorrect	Not sure
Total	75%	11%	14%
Gender			
Male	71	13	16
Female	80	8	12
Education			
College Graduate	88	7	5
Some College	86	8	6
High School Graduate	71	11	18
Not High School Graduate	60	18	22
Age			
18-29	64	15	21
30-49	85	7	8
50 and older	74	12	14
Region			
East	71	10	19
Midwest	81	10	9
South	75	10	15
West	76	13	11
Religion			
Protestant	79	11	10
Catholic	80	10	10
Religion in life...			
Very Important	80	8	12
Fairly Important	76	9	15
Not Very Important	61	22	17
Church Member	82	8	10
Not a Member	62	17	21
Attended in Last 7 Days	84	8	8
Did Not Attend	69	13	18

Study Says Fundamentalism Compromises Scientific Literacy in America

A recent study by Jon Miller of Northern Illinois University reported in the March 1, 1991 issue of *Science* found that overall knowledge of scientific principles is about the same among adults of all ages in Japan and the United States.

The study was conducted by asking people (over 2,000 in each country) whether they agreed or disagreed with seven commonly accepted scientific principles. The average score achieved was about the same in each country, but very different results were obtained for some of the questions. Miller has asserted, for example, that two statements that have potential religious implications--the "Big Bang" theory of the origin of the universe and the Darwinian theory of evolution --have demonstrated in his view that Christian fundamentalism has had a negative impact on U.S. science. Nearly twice as many Japanese answered these statements correctly; that is, in the manner that is accepted by the worldwide scientific community. Biblical literalists, however, generally take exception to those scientific theories.

Miller is quoted as saying "Some areas of science still raise religious tensions in the United States, reducing the percentage of Americans who would qualify as scientifically literate."

The statement on the Big Bang theory was worded as "the universe began with a huge explosion," while the theory concerning evolution was stated as "human beings developed from earlier species of animals."

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